



*Deep and Dynamic
Landscapes: Audience
Responses at Antony
and Cleopatra, Minack,
Cornwall, June 2013*

by Evelyn O'Malley

In the fading light of an evening performance, Mecaenas, Agrippa and Enobarbus planned Antony's marriage to Octavia whilst munching on apples. As they exited down the cliff steps, they flung their half-eaten apples into the sea. One splashed, then bobbed reddish-green in the water close to the rocks. In full view of the audience and while the Soothsayer warned Antony of Caesar's rise, a seagull plucked the apple from the waves, flew to a rock and munched it quickly - core and all - before flying off again. Neither event acknowledged the other in any particular way but the 'realness' of the apple had temporarily traversed the world of the play and the wider world in any case, quietly crunchy in both.

David Abram theorises depth as opposed to width and height in landscape, arguing that “[d]epth is not a determinate relation between inert objects arrayed within a static space, but a dynamic tension between bodies, between beings that beckon and repulse one another across an expanse that can never be precisely mapped” (98-99). Abram is trying to get away from two-dimensional ways of thinking about landscape and looking for a way to describe what happens in landscape, how it shifts with the eye of the (sometimes human,

sometimes nonhuman) perceiver. This kind of depth seems obvious at Minack. The theatre is cut into the sea-cliffs at Porthcurno, where the vast Atlantic meets the Cornish coast. On a clear day, Minack's expansive horizons stretch uncontained, obscured at other moments by mist, fog and rain, which alter what is perceived from the auditorium. Black tipped gulls make luminous white flecks where sunlight meets the clouds. Cormorants skim the surface, traversing stretches of sea in straight lines, before diving underwater. How deep is the sea? How far is the horizon? Below, above and at eye level, moving of their own accord and moving with the eye of the perceiver, birds and boats fly, float, swim, sail, dive, disappear and re-emerge from the waves that swirl and batter where sea meets stage. As evening unfolds, the luminous colours of beaches, cliffs and subtropical plants fade to shadows, then outlines, then memories. The birds that traversed the seascape in early evening are less and less visible but still there. Occasional wings blink and flicker at the furthest reaches of the electric stage lights, gliding through the shadows. Landscape at Minack is unmappable, dynamic and deep. In this paper, then, I draw from 32 interviews conducted with audience members before

and after performances of Another Way Theatre Company's *Antony and Cleopatra*, which ran from the 3rd – 7th June 2013.¹

Writing about Minack in *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance*, Shakespeare scholar Michael Dobson asks, 'given its potential for discomfort and Cornwall's high all-year-round annual rainfall [...] Why perform or watch Shakespeare out of doors at all, in a climate like this?' (187). He concludes that the enduring popularity of Shakespeare outdoors

[...] probably has less to do with what outdoor performance in such locations does aesthetically for the plays than with what the plays do ideologically for the locations. Like Edwardian pageants, open-air productions of Shakespeare integrate specific places within a nostalgic vision of the nation, its history and its culture. (2011: 187)

While Dobson's arguments around ideology, the elevated position of Shakespeare as 'high- culture' and even nationalism colour analyses of Minack (and, indeed, these

points are extensively problematised by Alan Kent in *Theatre in Cornwall* 2010: 635), I suggest that the audience ethnography I conducted at Minack in summer 2013 revealed more around the temporal appeal of being in a dynamic and deep landscape. Landscape and wildlife were more commonly cited than Shakespeare as primary reasons for attending the theatre. Being in landscape, as Tim Cresswell suggests, is what turns landscape into place (10). The depth of the landscape to which they responded was evident in the many references to wildlife, weather and scenery recurring and overlapping throughout the interviews.

Wildlife, Weather and Being-in-landscape

Like opera-glasses, binoculars at Minack help audiences to see the stage from a distance. Unlike opera glasses, they also assist bird watching. Audience members frequently referenced non-human animal and bird life in the landscape, their comments varying from specific 'sightings' or 'soundings' of particular species to generic references to birdsong. Gulls, geese, gannets, basking sharks and dolphins all featured as part of these conversations. Nonhuman animals formed

¹ My methodology is based on research conducted by Penelope Woods at Shakespeare's Globe between 2010 and 2011 (2012). Following the interviews, I conducted a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) of the interviews. Audience members were interviewed anonymously and have been given alternative names within the ethnography to personalise the writing.

a part of the social discourse around the unusual theatre space, pointing to what ethnographer Hillary Angelo, writing on birdwatchers and ornithologists, has called the ‘phenomenological, affective, dimension of human knowledge of nature’ (352). After watching the performance of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Clare, a relative local from Perranporth and a regular at Minack, said:

It’s actually been one of the warmer nights I’ve ever been at the Minack (*laughs*) so I’m actually not freezing cold which is really nice and actually I came out from up there I thought it’s not actually all that windy or anything so it’s sort of been a lovely kind of feeling in terms of sort of the physical kind of temperature and environment and everything and we’ve not seen dolphins but we did see the geese going over so yeah, it all added to the atmosphere and everything. (6 June 2013)

Along with her physical experience of the weather in the landscape, she recalled a flock of Canada Geese that had flown across the stage in V formation just moments prior to the end of the first half of the performance. Mike, Joe and Conor, who were at the same

performance and had witnessed the same intrusion, also conversed about their shared experience of the geese. While wildlife had shaped Clare’s expectations of Minack, the actual experience of the geese took Conor by surprise, his cap nearly blocking them out completely.

Mike: Your eye does get taken away by seabirds or whatever and then you look down and you realise you’re here to look at that. [*gestures down towards the stage*]

Joe: Yeah. We had a flock of geese going over and it was like ‘Oh, watch the geese for twenty seconds!’

Conor: Yeah, I saw the geese.

Joe: And it’s like, ‘Oh, we’ll spend twenty seconds with the geese rather than what’s going on.’

Conor: Actually I nearly missed them because of my own peaked cap. And then suddenly I looked up and I thought, ‘Oh!’ [*laughter from all*] (6 June 2013)

Joe went on to explain, however, that it was not boredom with the play or the acting prompting his distraction by the geese, but a

desire to take in all of the stimuli at Minack that evening. For Joe, the performance was one part of a whole experience. He articulated a way of interacting with environment that did not privilege either the performance or the other stimuli, indicating a kind of heightened alertness and interactive attention to a continuously changing, living and polyvocal landscape as he said:

I think you've got to... you've got to pay a lot of attention to what's going on down on the stage because wherever you're sitting you might miss a little bit of the action depending on the angle of where you're sitting. And, em, yeah, the sound sometimes with the wind and everything... the sound... the sound can be a little bit impaired. So you've got to be paying attention to that. And there's all the stuff going on around which is really interesting. You've got, you know, sort of boats going by. You've got things happening. I sometimes watch the tide coming in and out over there. During half of a show you can see how much the tide's come in and out. So it's kind of like

you've got everything going on around you, with the show going on as well. So you've got to be really active in your attention if you want to pay attention to all of those things. I mean, maybe I should be just concentrating on the show. But I think there's other things that I'm interested in in the environment that I want to see as well while I'm here. (6 June 2013)

There is a sense, then, that birdlife, weather, landscape, seascape and performance are all a part of Joe's immediate experience of Shakespeare at Minack.

As well as featuring as part of the immediate experience of landscape, wildlife also formed memories that were communicated as part of audience's recollections of previous Shakespeares at Minack, triggered by returning to the space. A couple on holidays from Hampshire were returning to Minack having visited years previously:

Dan: Well, I think the last time it was... was cold and wet?

Hazel: Yeah. It might have been, yeah, and then the sun came out and everyone took everything off again.

Dan: I can't actually remember which performance it was. But, eh, you know, it's always a great event. And the location...

Hazel: And [*suspense pause*]... there was a basking shark.

Evelyn: Oh wow!

Dan: Yeah.

Hazel: And it was massive. The performance is still going on and everyone went 'ah' when we see this basking shark and... brilliant. I mean, it's, you know... but no, it was brilliant. Even though it rained for a while nothing stopped. Did it?

Dan: A basking shark going behind the stage. (7 June 2013)

Dan and Hazel did not remember which play they had seen, although Dan had previously indicated that they were usually happy to see any Shakespeare. Their memory of the previous performance was partially situated in their embodied experience of weather (evidenced in their recollection of putting on and taking off of wet-weather gear). The basking shark featured prominently in their memory, suggesting that 'real' life, as it had intruded on this occasion, had been

more memorable than the represented life on stage. Rain, play and basking shark all figured in the construction of the memory, highlighting the interconnectedness of wildlife, weather, and performance in a deep, living landscape. Across the examples, the clash arising from multiple sentient beings speaking simultaneously was part of the pleasure of being at the event.

Descriptions of the landscape at Minack, however, repeatedly drew on the language of the theatre – of *scenery and backdrops* –, suggesting that the environment, the frame around the performance space, was considered a 'resource' in the service of the performance. Abram cautions, 'Even if we venture beyond the walls of our office or metropolis, we often find ourselves merely staring at the scenery' (2010: 141). Minack was repeatedly referred to as a suitable backdrop for *Antony and Cleopatra* because of the play's textual references to sea-battles. James, for instance, said, 'The scenes that stood out the most for me were the battle scenes at sea. The way they did that acting as the boat. That went very well... with the sea as the backdrop' (6 June 2013). Una Chaudhuri argues that 'the 'nature' that is landscape's subject is never free of cultural coding' (20) and, at *Antony and Cleopatra* at Minack, landscape was framed anthropocentrically and firmly coded as

theatre. Although at a theatre event, it is unsurprising that people used the language of the theatre to refer to their environment. Audience member Adrian articulated the complexity of talking about scenery in the context of outdoor performance at Minack, highlighting some of the overlapping metaphors of the environment and theatre respectively. He said:

I was on occasions distracted by the scenery... *scenery as in surroundings* rather than *scenery within the play*. I mean it's very difficult when you come here. You don't just sit there and look at the play. I mean it's a 360 degree panoramic experience so you've got the play and the surroundings. (6 June 2013 [my emphasis])

There is a distinction he makes between landscape as the built and/ or imagined scenery complementing the play itself (the scenery that was thought of as part of the performance) and the environment surrounding the wider place of performance (thought of as independent to the performance). At Minack, audiences were both separate from the performance and simultaneously co-inhabiting its scenery. They inhabited the scenery as well as staring at it. Although the language people

used may have been anthropocentrically coded as theatre, the effects it had on people in it respond to the experience of a deep and dynamic landscape.

Might living scenery at Minack, then, challenge the idea that a backdrop is always passive? For Maria at *Antony and Cleopatra*, the sea was a backdrop but it had its own active and affective agency:

It's just amazing, I mean, being outside and the backdrop of the sea as well. It's just a wonderful concept. That you could have outside theatre with just this backdrop, you know. It's just that the sea is a calming influence anyway, I think. It's just amazing, isn't it? (5 June 2013)

Audience members welcomed the sea for its aesthetic contribution to the performance and imagined some of the fictitious events of *Antony and Cleopatra* unfolding against this kind of backdrop. Nicola commented, 'It's set in Alexandria, by the coast, and we've just had the sea with the first battle... the first battle at sea and you've got the sea behind us. It's magic' (5 June 2013), and Cathy explained 'At the end when Cleopatra died, I think that's an image I'll remember and then the sea behind it and the whole setting' (5 June 2013). Mike elaborated on

the confluence between the play's locales and the sea too:

Well, I kind of think it's funny because when you're watching it... like in this one I can imagine like certainly the Egyptian thing... certainly being a setting to the Red Sea or something and then in Rome... Well, the scenes tend to lend themselves to having... there's nothing to say they shouldn't have an expansive ocean behind them. And I think it kind of builds in to the whole show. I like it. I can imagine them doing it with a backdrop like that. (6 June 2013)

For Adrian, the experience of the thematic content of the play was inseparable from the experience of the landscape and the life within it:

Generally, I thought the natural episodes where some engineered aspects of the sea, the tableaux, and some of the movement were particularly strong, particularly given the fact that they didn't overuse props. I thought that worked particularly well. They let the backdrop – the 360 degree or

whatever perspective do the business for them. With the colours too – that worked very well. The birds... (6 June 2013)

Similarly, Ellie and Ethan responded imaginatively to the events of the play as presented in the landscape. They conversed:

Ellie: Oh yes, the sea, the sea battles.

Ethan: Yes and of course Antony was able to turn to the sea and talk to Neptune face-on as it were.

Ellie: Yes definitely.

Ethan: Because he was standing on the edge of the ocean.

Ellie: Absolutely yes. And Cleopatra with her ships. Definitely yes you could really imagine that. (5 June 2013)

Ethan went on to discuss the physical experience of being at Minack, saying 'Inevitably the seats are hard so that's a bit of an endurance test but having said that on one side you couldn't ask for a better experience', suggesting that his was not a passive experience of staring at scenery (5 June 2013). For Giles, also, the physical experience of landscape was mixed up with

his aesthetic experience of the performance. He explained:

It's terrific that they're able to do a matinee we'll come away, you know, sort of refreshed and the weather's still, you've got the wonderful rest of the day ahead of you. Particularly being outside. I think a lot of the scenes towards the coves worked extremely well em in the magnitude of the chaos at the court at the end. I think that was important given the nature of the 360 degree landscape. That's memorable. That and the weather. (6 June 2013)

Giles continued by elaborating on what it felt like to be physically present in the landscape at Minack and how weather affected his experience of the play:

Em, you need some stamina – getting up from below [laughter]. And you need to be prepared, em, you know, in terms of how comfortable you feel and refreshments. Eh the winds and the elements, which are always important. They particularly are of significance when you see a performance of something

in the background during a significant soliloquy, you know. (6 June 2013)

Flo described her experience of *Antony and Cleopatra* in terms of an imaginative response to the performance in a dynamic landscape too. First, she picked out a particular moment where she felt that the play related to the landscape, saying:

I think for me it was when Mark Antony came in and he was wet and his hair was wet so you knew that he was coming off of a battle from the sea. For me that's when it kind of all came together. (7 June 2013)

She went on to explain how the overall experience of the performance in the place affected her, explaining:

I think the first word that comes to me is provocative. Because the play em in itself has a lot of provocative sort of moments. And I think that the, em, surrounding is very provocative because it really makes you come together with nature, um, and you know with the sea and the sun and the seagulls. I mean it's, I don't know, there's just something really provocative

about nature generally and I
think the two together are really
beautiful. (7 June 2013)

At Minack, then, even when culture framed the environment, turning it into ‘scenery’, the landscape was not considered a passive backdrop; it was experienced as dynamic, deep and full of life. Audience members spoke about wildlife, weather and landscape as contributors to pleasure and enjoyment. The physical experience of being-in-scenery combined with the themes, imagery and sometimes just the idea of Shakespeare’s play facilitated a temporary experience of being in place. Although Another Way’s *Antony and Cleopatra* was not designed to draw attention to ecology or to highlight human relationships with the more-than-human world, the audience responses to performances at Minack pointed to an experience of landscape that was deep, dynamic and in itself ecological.

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